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'New, improved' Soviet tank a product of Pentagon artists

By James Coates

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WASHINGTON—The Pentagon overstated the strengths of a Soviet tank last year while pressing to buy the new American M-1 tank, which has had a history of frequent breakdowns, major fuel consumption problems and other difficulties.

Defense establishment critics contend the Pentagon has also set the stage for a request for funds to improve the controversial M-1 by manipulating reports concerning the Soviet weapon.

"It's a clear case of threat inflation," said Paul Hoven, a ground warfare specialist with the reform group, Project on Military Procurement.

That was denied by Maj. Bob Shields, an Army spokesman who nevertheless acknowledged that what has been described as a "new" Soviet weapon is actually only an improved version of a tank that has been in use for at least eight years, the T-72.

During last year's military budget debate, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and other Pentagon officials defended the controversial \$3-million-per-vehicle M-1 U.S. main battle tank by warning that the Soviets had developed a tank, the T-80, that would feature the same armor, laser sights, computers and other components of the M-1.

THE SOVIET TANK was first described in the booklet, "Soviet Military Power," which Weinberger published in September, 1981.

Instead of containing a photograph, however, the booklet had only an artist's drawing of the tank showing it plated with the same modern Chobham armor as the American M-1 and bristling with grenade and mortar launching tubes, laser sights and other innovations.

The caption read, "The T-80 tank, now in experimental production, is the third, new class of tank with markedly improved firepower, armor and mobility produced by the USSR in recent years, a weapons system underscoring the across-the-board Soviet quest for quantitative and qualitative weapons superiority."

On March 9 this year, however, Weinberger published the second

version of "Soviet Military Power," which included a full-page photograph of the T-80, taken during a military parade in Moscow on Nov. 7, 1981, just a few weeks after the artist's drawing had been published by Weinberger.

THE PHOTOGRAPH shows a machine almost indistinguishable from the well-known T-72 main battle tank, which has been photographed throughout Eastern Europe and in the war in Afghanistan, Shields said.

"The 80 is just an improved version of the T-72," he acknowledged.

Instead of incorporating the Chobham armor, a multilayered arrangement of different metals and fibers, the T-80 proved to have an ordinary foundry-cast turret just like the Soviet T-72 tank and the older T-64.

Turrets such as the one on the U.S. M-1 made of Chobham-type armor have a distinctive faceted appearance while ordinary tank turrets are cast in one piece and, therefore, have a rounded appearance, noted Jane's most recent report on "Weapons and Tactics of the Soviet Army."

Jane's, a British publisher devoted mainly to military reports, said "Those who have seen photographs of the T-80 describe it as resembling a T-72 with a more angular turret."

HOVEN AND a colleague, Joseph Bernice, have prepared an article for the Army's technical publication, "Armor," which forecasts that the Soviets will eventually field the new tank with the Chobham armor but that it will be designated the T-85.

That tank, said Hoven, will then be cited by the Pentagon to argue for an improved version of the M-1 tank.

"They didn't need the T-85 this year so they ran a picture of the T-80," said Hoven. "They (the Pentagon) are saving the real new tank for later on, so there will be an argument for a new improved M-1."

Shields confirmed that U.S. intelligence sources have indeed developed information that the Soviets are working on a substantially different main battle tank with Chobham armor, an extra driving wheel and other modifications.

Shields said that the artist's "conception" published in 1981 as the T-80 is actually "more like" the newer Soviet tank.

"LAST YEAR we had an artist drawing from what he was being told by our intel (intelligence) guys and this year we had a photograph that proved that the 80 is just an improved version of the T-72," said Shields.

Photographs of the tank Weinberger designated the T-80 have been published for more than a year by the Soviet news agency Tass. Japanese magazines, for example, have published several photos during 1982 showing the T-80s parading down Red Square in Moscow but identified as T-72As in the captions, said Hoven.

These photos show that the Soviets added tubes for launching smoke grenades to the turret, removed an optical gunsight in favor of a laser sight and "probably added a computer," he said.

Currently both the FMC Corp. and General Dynamics Corp. are designing a "follow-on" tank to eventually replace or augment the 7,000-plus M-1s the Army plans to buy.

ONE OF THE MAJOR redesign schemes that have been reported in the journal *Armor* would remove the turret from the M-1, leaving only the main gun and a television camera on top.

The reason for that change, noted one *Armor* article, is that while the Chobham armor in the turret is particularly effective protecting the crew from "heat rounds" designed to burn through the wall of an ordinary tank, the armor can be defeated by shells moving at a high rate of speed, so-called "kinetic rounds."

By removing the turret altogether and replacing one of the four crew members in the M-1 with an automatic loading machine, the tank corps will have a machine that is relatively protected against both heat rounds and kinetic rounds, proponents argue.

"When they start trying to sell Congress a tank without a turret and a still higher price tag," Hoven said, "they're going to need all the help they can get, and that's what the Army is saving the T-85 for."

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The Soviet T-80 tank

An artist's conception

Comparing battle tanks

Soviet T-80 tank U.S. M-1 tank

Weight Weight
42 tons 60 tons

Height Height
87-90 inches 93 inches

Length Length
without gun without gun
276 inches 384.5 inches

Soviet T-80 tank U.S. M-1 tank Soviet T-80 tank U.S. M-1 tank

Cruising speed Cruising speed Gun Gun
43.5 m.p.h. 45 m.p.h. 125 mm. 105 mm.

Cruising range Cruising range Rounds Rounds
279 miles 131 miles 40 55

Note: All dimensions of the Soviet T-80 are approximate

Chicago Tribune Graphic. Sources: U.S. Department of Defense and Chicago Tribune news reports

